AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CULTURES GALLERY 'THE SPEAKING LAND': A REVIEW ARTICLE

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> [M]useums are representations of the societies in which they are situated...They are repositories of culture, machines for recontextualization, and platforms for the creation and promotion of cultural heritage. (Ames 1992: 47)

It has often occurred to me that the normal manner of reviewing various forms of major public manifestations, be they plays, opera or ballet, at the very beginning of their existence before they have grown into some degree of harmony with what is perceived to be the original intent of their creator(s), is about as meaningless as trying to assess a major new museum project too soon after its public opening.

The new Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery at the South Australian Museum is no longer so new. So how are we to offer a critique, now well over a year after that major event in the calendar of cultural innovations along the cultural drag that is Adelaide's North Terrace, the opening of the Gallery by the Premier of South Australia on 3 March 2000? Certainly it seems a far cry from the publication of the Edwards Report with its largely damning comments on the situation as it was then on the North Terrace and its guidelines for future improvement (Edwards 1981: 89–96).

Firstly, it must be remembered that, like all critiques purporting to be objective, this present article is one person's view of a complex whole which itself attempts to reflect varying human reactions to varying environments over more—almost certainly much more—than 50 000 years. Also, given the Museum's laudable and continuing involvement of indigenous Australians—another feature which continues a key recommendation of the Edwards Report — while my comments may reflect contemporary and personal contacts with varying groups and individuals from contemporary indigenous Australian society, I am of course not an indigenous Australian. Perhaps the Anthropology Editor of these *Records* should commission a second article to add an indigenous voice to these whitefella comments – albeit that too would be only one voice among many.

It is no excuse—if excuse is needed—to add that, like practically any outsider who has been accepted into a remote indigenous community, I too have an indigenous name plus all the responsibilities of a whole new group of 'skin' relations. It hardly needs to be emphasised that there is nothing mystical in this system of 'honorary' relationships; it is a purely practical solution to a practical problem, of locating us others within the community. But any outsiders who find themselves in a similar situation and think that they are thereby entering a true state of 'Aboriginality', or that they have passed some form of initiation, are deluding themselves; Bruce Chatwin (1987), among others, has much to answer for.

Secondly, the enormity of the task that the Museum's curatorial and adjunct staff, materially assisted by the project's Sydney-based designers and multimedia consultants, set themselves has been nothing less than ambitious. Philip Jones, who wrote the original brief for the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery (hereafter AACG—the plural in 'Cultures' is significant) but since then seems, enviably, to have moved from the hurly-burly of museum curatorial work to a life of almost uninterrupted research, stated in 1996 that the new gallery would seek

> to present an encyclopaedic view of Aboriginal material culture and traditions which cannot be duplicated elsewhere. The depth of the Museum's artefact and archival collections, together with our commitment to a working partnership, will ensure that result' (quoted in Kean 2001).

Philip Clarke (2001), who really had the overall responsibility for bringing the AACG from concept to reality, has stated the aim rather more succinctly:

> The main aim of the exhibition is to describe the technologies used by Aboriginal people who have lived in the climatically variable continent of Australia for over 50,000 years.

In its attempt to achieve this, the exhibition team has used 3000 of the Museum's total of around 30 000 Aboriginal ethnographic specimens. This is a very impressive proportion, considering that most museums rarely have more than a twentieth of their collections on public display. Until very recently, ethnographical collections have been the Cinderellas of the museum world. Despite a renaissance of interest in material cultural studies (as Reynolds 1989 has noted), there is still a shortfall in staffing, both to curate and to manage collections. Leaving on one side the question of the disadvantages as opposed to the benefits of dividing these often ill-defined duties, Reynolds recorded the results of a survey of museums as sources of information. He commented that in Australia in 1981, the average number of artefacts for which curators in some

FIGURE 1 Level 1, Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery, South Australian Museum, showing Dress exhibit with MacDonnell Ranges exhibit at left rear. Photo © South Australian Museum.

nine museums were responsible was around 15 500, with four in his sample exceeding 20 000. At the present time there are two curators responsible for the ethnographic collections of the South Australian Museum and each have well in excess of 20 000 objects under their care.

The excitement of the opening long since over, missing labels placed in position, lighting levels tweaked—but I find them lower than conservation good practice demands—what are the impressions one now has as one turns into the Gallery from the panoramic airiness of the rebuilt main entrance of the Museum? One Saturday morning I followed a small school party of ten-year-olds around. The first reaction was, 'Isn't it dark?' So it mostly is (Figure 1) and while there are clearly good conservation reasons for this, I could see nowhere a visible (!) explanation. This, then, is not a place to experience, save in miniature, the hard light of the desert or the blue of the skies of the Great South Land.

In the AACG both the distant past and the immediate present appear only as rather slender bookends to the central theme. While the relative down-playing of the latter is defensible, particular in the light—literally—of the indigenous 'talking heads', the former, despite what may be gleaned from the touch-screens of the 'Speaking Land', seems little more than a display-in-progress, with precious little space let alone actual material to support the lengthy timeline. The Museum has indeed been too long without the services of a full-time Curator of Archaeology. This is a mere apology for antiquity which crams into a few cubic metres what is labelled with excessive conservatism 50 000 – 60 000 years of indigenous settlement. True, Roger Luebber's fascinating, if still largely unpublished, discoveries in 1973–74 of 10 000-year-old wooden artefacts at Wyrie Swamp in south-east South Australia are featured on the 'Speaking Land'. I looked in vain, however, for any even halfway reasonable treatment of the late Graeme Pretty's excavations, also yet to be fully published, of the burial ground at Roonka Flat on the Murray, a site where archaeology and local indigenous concerns came together in complete harmony.

Nonetheless, the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery has been designed not just for indigenous Australians (though it is clear that without the cooperation of many indigenous Australians there would have been no new gallery) and not just for all Australians, but for all visitors to the Museum, be they from Jogjakarta or Jamaica, Argentina or Aberdeen. So there is another test which needs to be applied: how well does the AACG carry out its overall brief to inform all, whatever be the depth of their ignorance or their lack of interest in the face of more pressing matters, such as the latest modern Disney fairytale or a day at the footy?

There is an enormous plus to this display. Along the north wall of the gallery as one enters Level 1, there is a large panel of portraits selected by Fiona Macdonald. These are mostly monochrome photographs, with Norman Tindale and Unaipon sharing the honours with Pastor Johann Reuter and many others. A few 'windows' offer film clips in colour of smiling faces (an intentional choice to start things on a positive spin?) but there is no sound. For that one has to move on to the eight regional sections where individual voices (literally talking heads) speak to you (the viewer), drawing you in to the display, inviting you to be part of it. Everyone must be attracted to one or other screen, neatly activated when the visitor stops to read the brief descriptive label. For me, Judy Lucas speaking of her return from Adelaide to her family's ancestral land up the Birdsville Track eloquently represents the plight of many that have sought their roots after long separation.

Here is the *Leitmotiv* of the AACG. It is not the static displays which seem to catch the attention of every visitor but, in a neat marriage between new technology and ancient rights and beliefs, the 'Speaking Land', the title which greets you as you sink—oh bliss, oh joy—into the liberally distributed, leather-covered banquettes. Strategically placed, here are the various touch-screen monitors that allow one to self-drive through the various themes, technologies and regions which make up the AACG; '1600 images, 50 video clips, 20 audio clips and 12 virtual reality sequences' trumpeted the media release at the opening.

In parenthesis, while obviously the strengths of the Museum's holdings have determined the content of the 'Speaking Land', the total absence of any coverage of the first significant point of culture contact in the Sydney–Hawkesbury region, let alone demonstration of the same region's rich rock-art, borders on the parochial. Be that as it may, the technology—both the software and hardware, purpose designed and built—certainly works but one wonders for how long and at what cost to maintain. I have not been surprised to observe that most visitors under the age of thirty, early on in their visit, drift toward the screens like so many moths attracted to the light on a dark night.

But this is not to complain; on the contrary. The previous major indigenous ethnographic display at the South Australian Museum was *Ngurunderi: an Aboriginal Dreaming*. This exhibition had much the same curatorial team as for the AACG, followed the admirable policy of indigenous consultation and cooperation, and presented the story of the Lower Murray and the Coorong delta—roughly equivalent to the South-East region in the new display—from prehistory to the present, with an excellent introductory film, mixture of text panels, touch-screens, static displays and, most popular of all, a number of full-scale dioramas. As I observed some years ago (Megaw 1990: 81):

> In preparing some of the three-dimensional exhibits for *Ngurunderi,* despite the long and almost universal popularity of the South Australian Museum's dioramas, the (non-Aboriginal) design team was concerned to get away from the earlier types of presentation of the Aborigine-as-showcase-artefact...In the end it was decided to use no three-dimensional figures at all and to restrict any humans to contemporary illustrations, two dimensional reconstruction drawings or indistinct background figures in a landscape...This was certainly not the wish of several of the Ngarrindjeri advisers as there have been many questions asked by a gratifyingly large number of Aboriginal visitors to the exhibition: 'Where have all the people gone?'

After one's voyage of discovery through the various modules—an unchartered voyage since it seems to have been the curators' and the designers' intent that there should be no set pathway, the wisdom of which I think may be debatable—many visitors who make their way to the second, upper, level of the exhibition, may well feel like the prisoners in the last act of Beethoven's *Fidelio* drawn to the light, in this case the Indigenous Information Centre. But few enter it. The Centre, which contains the archives of the Aboriginal Family History project, is serving a vital role in continuing to make available to indigenous Australians its unrivalled genealogical resources. It seems a pity that more of the general public are not availing themselves of yet another computer-based resource and of the opportunity to speak to indigenous staff, especially to the tour guides, graduates of Tauondi's Cultural Agency (formerly the Aboriginal Community College).

It has to be said that 'art', however you define that elusive little three-letter word, is not foregrounded in the AACG. This may be intentional recontextualisation, to offset the decontextualisation (the 'you-don't-have-to-know-anything-about-art, just-feel-the-quality') approach of the sister institution next door, the Art Gallery of South Australia. Indeed, some of the artistic treasures of the AACG are almost hidden. At the northern end of the second level of the Gallery is the great acrylic painting, a cooperative exposition of four separate 'Dreamings', commissioned by the Museum in 1996 and executed over a three-day period by no less than 29 Warlpiri and Anmatyerre men and women. This cries out for more than the comparatively brief and distinctly dry explanatory panel in order fully to unpick the various 'webs of relatedness', to get something of the flavour—let alone smell—of the context out of which such art arises (for art it is by anyone's standards). I can remember, on my first visit to Papunya 20 years ago, the shock of realising that great art was being produced on the desert floor with the camp dogs lifting their legs on the canvas edges and the painters literally sitting on the canvas, the better to execute their share of the composition.

In the temporary display area on the ground floor there is some attempt to get away from a sanitised approach to art. Currently there is a selection from the 30 doors from the school at Yuendumu painted in 1983 at the invitation of the school principal by senior Warlpiri men, partly as an educational tool and partly as a riposte to their women folk who had already been producing works on canvas for sale (Warlukurlangu Artists 1987). I observed my sample visitor making a bee-line for one of the doors and exclaiming 'Look, Dad, are there any other tags?' and pointing to where—absolutely correctly in my opinion—ArtLab, in undertaking conservation of the doors, had not removed the word 'LIZZIE'.

There is work to be done here on the later associations of, and reactions to, the Yuendumu doors. This material should then be included in the data bank of the 'Speaking Land', though I was delighted to see inclusion of a clip from the Film Australia's film 'Dreamings' made by indigenous film-maker and photographer Michael Riley to accompany the block-buster exhibition of the same name. I looked but did not see evidence of use of the ABC's brilliant film made in 1989 starring Dr Christopher Anderson (Director of the Museum during the AACG's development stage), a work which demonstrated that a little liquid lubrication does wonders for one's fluency in speaking extempore to camera. *Market of Dreams* must surely rank as one of the best visual studies

dealing with aspects of 'ethnographic' art and is worthy to take its place beside Curtis Levy's *Sons of Namatjira*, made for the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1974.

Despite its relative down-playing of contemporary material culture, whether of outback communities or town and city, in many ways it seems to me that the AACG stands up well in comparison to the exhibits in other institutions. One may cite attempts in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney to make the 'today' as well as the 'yesterday' of indigenous Australia intelligible to a world in which *we* not *they* are the 'other'. By and large, these seem to have succumbed to the tyranny of the designer, liberally assisted by more than a touch of political correctness, not to be confused with sensitivity towards indigenous concerns, a sensitivity which clearly suffuses much of the AACG.

Consider in contrast *Bunjilaka* at the new mega-Museum of Victoria (which sidelines the archaeological perspective—Russell 2000), the 'Gallery of First Australians' in Canberra's National Museum of Australia (which opened in March 2001—for a brief description see: Anon. 2001 and for a less-than-enthusiastic review see

FIGURE 2 Level 2, Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery, South Australian Museum, showing Play exhibit, 'The kukuru game'. Photo © South Australian Museum.

Mundine 2001), or the first to redesign its public galleries, the Australian Museum in Sydney. All three demonstrate a clear polemic in favour of a number of contemporary issues, a matter by no means shirked in Adelaide's AACG. While these other new displays rate ten out of ten for presenting 'The Important Issues', they get barely a pass mark for presentation. In Canberra, the individual cases with their heavy stainless steel frames, and small objects often dominated by metal supports, together with the general open-plan design of the Museum, may be summed up in one word—'unsympathetic'. It is a relief to move into the reserve collections and return to the principles of open storage.

After all, there is nothing that dates so quickly as fashions in design. Certainly one can only admire, tinged with envy, the obviously generous publication budget available to the National Museum but, just as in its current displays (which seem at times to be closer to street theatre than to the stereotypical serried ranks of glass museum cases), there are some odd omissions. To produce a catalogue (Taylor 2001), let alone an exhibition, showing concepts of the land as seen through contemporary indigenous art which includes neither the acrylic paintings of the Centre nor Hermannsburg watercolours is taking innovation too far.

Adelaide's AACG is in certain ways a surprisingly old-fashioned display. Examine the division into technological themes (Figure 2) such as boomerangs, spears, glue (vital indeed, since the development of adhesive permitted, for example, the manufacture of multibarbed projectiles), baskets, drugs, stone tools, watercraft (a popular item with younger visitors), string and fire (fire that can destroy and can regenerate life). In view of the fact that Philip Clarke started out his professional life as a biologist, it is no surprise that this taxonomic-cum-evolutionary approach should be to the fore.

Thus the AACG, despite its apparent 'modernity', may be likened to the displays in the South Australian Museum's Pacific Gallery. Further afield, one could point to the older displays at the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford, which still reflect the principles of cataloguing and display by type of object (Figure 3) established by the museum's

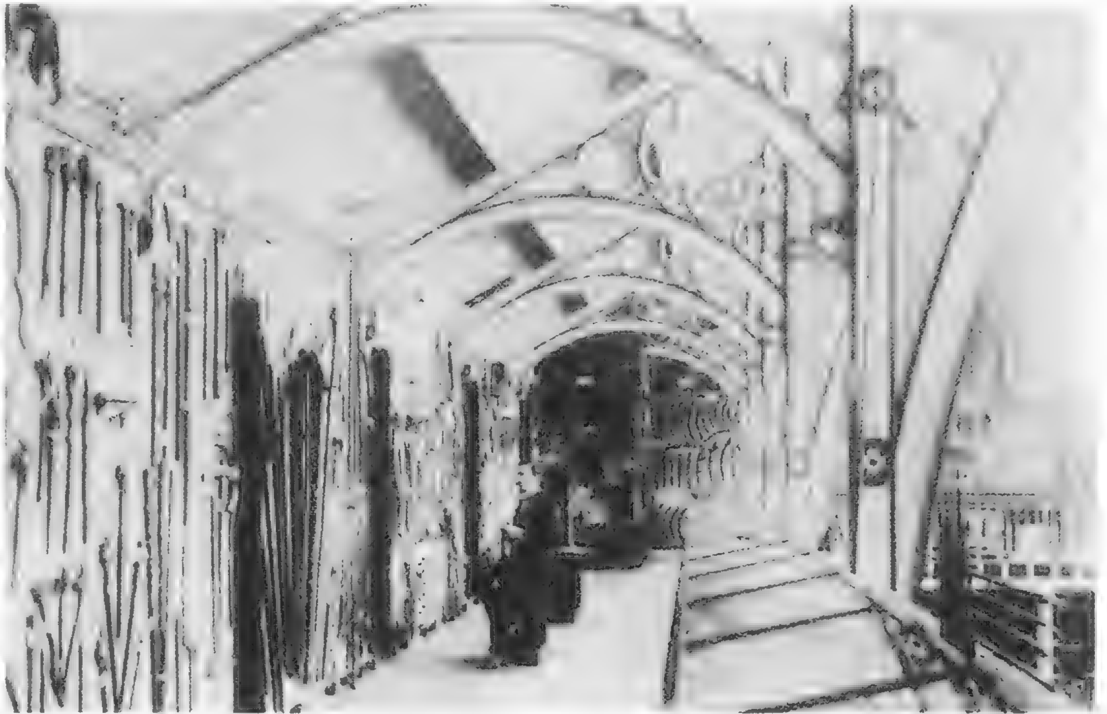

FIGURE 3. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Henry Balfour working on the weapons displays in the Upper Gallery, c. 1890. Photo: © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

original benefactor, Lieutenant General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers (1827–1900). He espoused the then new principles of sociocultural evolutionism, or 'applied anthropology' as he called it. In the context of considering under what terms he might leave his collection to the Nation on his death, he declined to make any special stipulations about 'the arrangement of the objects':

> If my system were accepted by men of science, it would be continued. If it were not, there would be no object in continuing it. Moreover, views become so much changed as knowledge accumulates that it would be mischievous to hamper the future with ideas of the present (quoted by Chapman in Cranstone & Seidenberg 1984: 16; see also Bowden 1991: 50–51, Petch 1996).

Thus he expressed his confidence that his system was scientifically objective and would stand the test of time. *Plus ça change* . . .

Classification, as we have already noted, is indeed what museums are about and there are continuing debates as to how to do it, especially in the area of (what it is no longer fashionable to call) 'ethnographic displays'. In a very percipient essay born of the author's experience of the British Museum's Museum of Mankind—currently being returned to its Bloomsbury home—Durrans considers differing approaches to the re-presenting (rather than representing) of cultures undergoing change. 'Museums are increasingly criticized not only for the way they represent certain themes in exhibitions, but also for their choice in the first place' and he adds, 'appreciating the social and cultural setting of an object does not exhaust and is not a substitute for an appreciating of the object itself' (Durrans 1988: esp. pp.155–158; on ethical issues and the use of photo archives see also Pinney 1989).

Michael Ames, the Canadian anthropologist and museologist, has frequently argued for 'empowerment' of those who in the past have so frequently been denied access to the strong rooms of their own material past, our museums. In 1976 Ames introduced in the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology—surely one of the world's most perfectly sited public buildings—his system of visible storage.

> The system operates like a large library or supermarket, with the exception that customers can handle objects only under staff supervision; meanwhile, they have unhindered visual access to collections *and to the catalogue data* (Ames 1992: 91, my emphasis).

And this is the difference. In Adelaide it is fine to have the opportunity not only of regular guided tours but, in particular, the resources of the Indigenous Information Centre. In the displays however, as we have already observed, it is visible information that is really noticeable by its absence, being either difficult to find or to read once found, or simply not there (for example, the 31 shields and the 13 feather decorations on the west wall of Level 2). It seems writ large over every designer's CAD screen 'Thou shall not use one word when you can get away with none'. The AACG's labels, where they exist, are restricted to the briefest of information as to provenance and accession and it has become a truism of museum best practice that one underestimates at one's peril the power of language to marginalise (Coxall 2000).

It is not enough to provide that 21st century equivalent to the fair ground fruit machine – the touch-screen. As recent research into the effect of early introduction to computers on learning skills has shown, it is often detrimental, rather than of assistance, to understanding. On my half-dozen or so visits since the Gallery opened, I have overheard at the Museum Shop requests for 'more on the Aboriginal Gallery' or 'Haven't you got something about the Yuendumu doors?' There is of course, but bilingual texts don't attract your average museum visitor wanting to know more but not *that* much more (see Warlukurlangu Artists 1987). Too many museum institutions underrate the public's desire for portable information, the movable relic, the link with the artefact. It is rare to find in museum visitors' books comments that echo Samuel Goldwyn Jnr's Philistine cry: 'Don't confuse my mind with facts—it's already made up'.

Commencing with the wall of portraits, the still images as well as archival film employed in the displays represent but the tip of another resource iceberg. The danger is that the archival images, like icebergs, can 'sink the ship'. It may well be argued that photography retains a certain immediacy, an assurance of contextual truth and realism which can assist the appreciation of the object better even than three-dimensional reconstructions which, however realistic, remain just that. But the camera captures only an aspect of truth. For one thing, as soon as the photograph has been taken it becomes an historical document (and for some people irrelevant or, worse, mistaken as a representation of the present). Further, we see the subject not through the lens of the camera so much as through the eyes of the

photographer, a particular human being with his or her own cultural inheritance and assumptions. The best that can be hoped for is that the viewer can perceive *what* it was that drew the photographer's attention at that particular place and at that moment in time.

For many people, Baldwin Spencer's pioneering images of the turn of the 20th century, or Tindale's of no more than a generation ago, have become (mere) historic curiosities; they have started to represent just that kind of exotica which is what first attracted museums to collect. David Attenborough, who has done so much to broaden our horizons to encompass much of what has heretofore lain outside our normal ken, is still within the tradition of the exotica hunter.

We are reminded when we look at such technically superb still images as those produced by Charles Mountford or Axel Poignant, or more recently Penny Tweedie, that there is the *aesthetic* intent in photography to consider as well. In a study of a curator from the American Museum of Natural History who collected and photographed in the Congo before World War II, Mirzoeff (1998: 169) notes how the

> photograph is transformed by intimacy from a document into art...Any reading of photography is dogged by the cultural construction of the photograph as either observed truth or transcendent art.

Conscious of this dilemma, the Edwards Report advises:

> Great care must be taken to associate the audio-visual presentation directly with actual objects and displays in the museum, so it is not just an event in its own right, but also an integral part of the museum (Edwards 1981: 90).

Not so much a case of *caveat emptor* as 'beware anthropologists bearing cameras and exhibition teams waving photographs'.

One may add here that something of the same kind of problem of creation and control arises in the recording and subsequent storage of sound. Why is it that the archival voice-overs of the early film used in the AACG sound stilted, foreign, almost exotic in contrast to the immediacy, the 'relevance' of the indigenous talking heads? It is not just a matter of improved recording technology and playback facilities. 'Imagination' and 'political motivation' have been emphasised as being essential in exploiting the immense possibilities of recorded sound in the museum setting (Silver 1988: 194).

Despite the explicit statements of intent already quoted, there is in fact something of a lack of detail in the philosophy behind the AACG. I do not know what sort of comparative research went into planning the AACG. If one were to look for prior guidance, despite the obvious common ancestry in the colonial foundations of our older museums and the best efforts of COMA (the Conference of [Australian] Museum Anthropologists), there has been comparatively little published in Australia on various aspects of museums and material culture, in contrast with the situation overseas. To whole volumes in the field one must add the admirable journal produced by the Museum Ethnographers Group in the United Kingdom, which I have had cause to cite at various points in this review (Barringer & Flynn 1998; Pearce 1989; Shelton 1997; compare Mulvaney 1990).

As to how the punters have reacted to this, the greatest—and, praise be—free show in Adelaide, why in fact they come at all, or why many of them do not first make a bee-line for the fossils and the much overrated Egyptian Room (a protected heritage site not so much because of the Ptolemaic—and frankly hideous—mummies but rather because the room is such a perfect example of museum display techniques c. AD 1940), these are questions to which as yet there are no answers.

According to the Museum, over 850 000 people have come through its doors during the 16 months since its re-opening, but it is not known how many of those visited the AACG, nor is there any information as to age, socioeconomic grouping or ethnicity. We know that there have been around 25 000 school children through the AACG during the same period and several hundred enquiries made at the Indigenous Information Centre; we do not know what sales of specifically indigenous Australian titles there have been at the Museum Shop strategically placed immediately to the left of the main entrance, though I have a shrewd idea that anything to do with dinosaurs would win hands down.

Certainly there is nothing available which is on a par with Merriman's (1989) examination of a decade ago as to the role that museum visiting plays in British culture. The total lack, as yet, of any information about the AACG in general or its component parts, in any language other than English, says little for the Museum's marketing department or its image in a multicultural world—though the Museum Shop sports copies of Wally Caruana's 1993 introduction to indigenous Australian art, in both German and French. Perhaps one needs to consider more the role of

the museum shop in our museums, again something which has been discussed for a number of years in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (White 1996, 2001).

Yet in one of a handful of serious reviews devoted to the AACG, or for that matter to any other display (on this lack see Wehner 2001), John Kean, far from decrying what he terms 'the traditional values of scholarship, the primacy of the collection and the legacy of the institution's own history', concludes that 'the brave mood to run counter to the contemporary museological currents has resulted in an exhibition of sustained power and surprising emotive force' (Kean 2001).

Over all is the image and the voice of Norman Tindale, the butterfly collector turned anthropologist whose position in the annals of indigenous Australian studies has been assured by nearly 50 years of devotion to the life—past, present and future—of Aboriginal society and

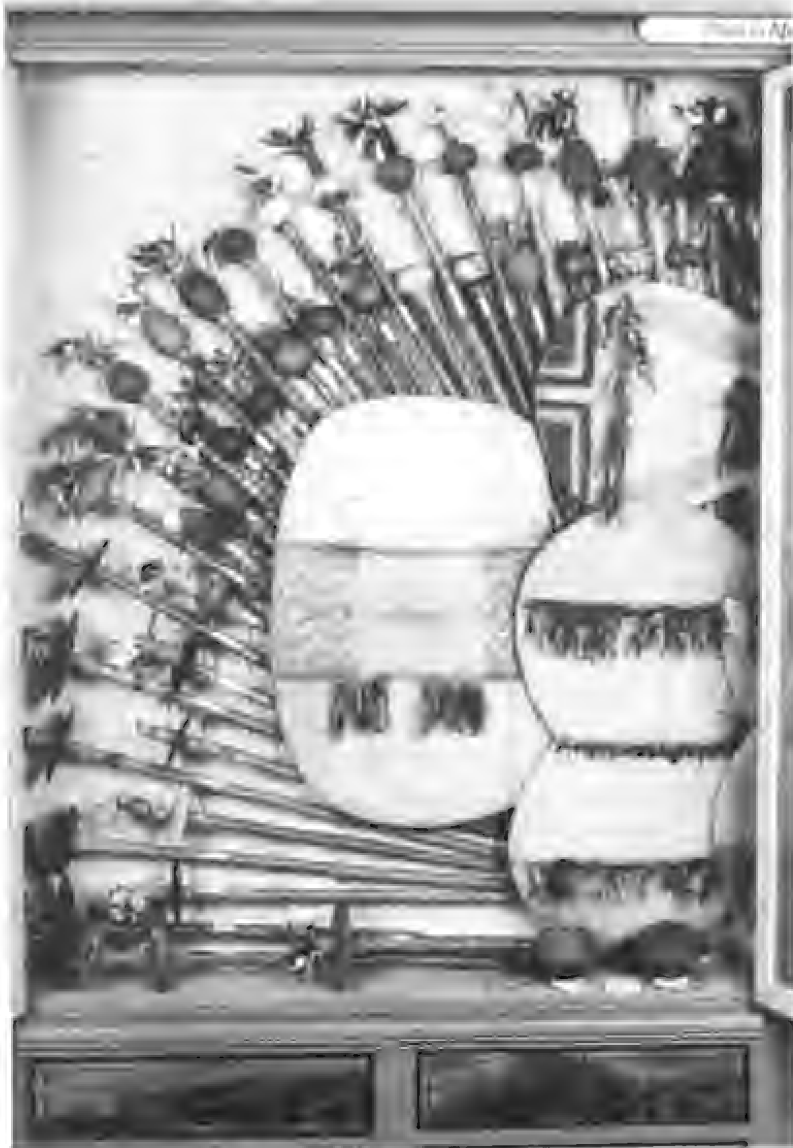

FIGURE 4. South Australian Museum, Pacific Cultures Gallery. Part of display of shields and stone-headed clubs from Central Province, Papua New Guinea. Photo: Barry Craig, 1998.

culture. Tinny's legacy is prodigious but Philip Clarke and his collaborators have produced something of which all who are interested in indigenous culture can be proud. Clarke (2001) is surely right when he comments:

> The future challenge for the South Australian Museum is to maintain the relevance of the material it displays. Given the flexibility of the design and the use of the 'Speaking Land' interactives, it should be possible for future curators to reinvigorate the display without going through a total reinstallation.

Mindful of Pitt Rivers' words quoted above, we should remember that a truly static display is a dead display. By the terms of the definition with which I started this article, the AACG team has done well. While I hope that there will indeed be scope for revision and alteration in the years to follow (especially with regard to the 'bookends'), the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery should remain as a visible example of further movement towards indigenous empowerment together with maintenance of the highest standards of conservation and scientific enquiry—in other words, just what reconciliation should be all about.

A final thought: we have waited a long time for the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery to become a reality. How much longer will we have to wait until the 'foreign' ethnographic collections are given the same makeover? (Figure 4). The disruption to that Gallery caused by the alterations to the buildings in 1999 have not been made good, with at least a third of the exhibits lacking information labels of any kind. And chicken wire has surely had its day as a feature at the cutting edge of display technique.

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